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ABSTRACT

When historians of the U.S. antebellum free black community examine attitudes toward emigration, they invariably focus on hostility to the American Colonization Society (ACS). However, while many free people were deeply disturbed by the efforts of the ACS to send them to Liberia, they were ready to consider settling on Haiti. In 1818, Prince Saunders, of Boston, praised Haiti to his fellow blacks and planned to work with Haiti's King Henry Christophe to encourage their emigration to that country. However, a rebellion and the king's death interfered. The country's new president, Jean Pierre Boyer, saw immigration of blacks from the United States as a solution to all his problems. Haiti was desperately short of manpower, and Boyer, who feared a French invasion, needed allies. He thought that in return for taking in thousands of unwanted free blacks, a grateful U.S. Government would grant him diplomatic recognition. He offered to subsidize their relocation and envisioned the arrival of 6,000 settlers in the first year. Emigration societies sprang up in the United States all along the Atlantic seaboard and as far west as Cincinnati. The relocation process was not always successful, and some disenchanted blacks returned to the United States. However, many others stayed and sent back glowing reports of their newly adopted country. (JB)

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'TO REUNITE THE GREAT FAMILY': FREE BLACKS AND HAITIAN EMIGRATION

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'To Reunite the Great Family': Free Blacks and Haitian Emigration

When historians of America's antebellum free black community examine attitudes towards emigration they invariably focus on hostility to the American Colonization Society. However, while many free people were deeply disturbed by the efforts of the ACS to send them to Liberia, they were ready to consider settling on Haiti. Speaking to a white officer of the ACS in 1817, James Forten, a Philadelphia native, explained that, for him, Haiti's very existence proved that Blacks "would become a great nation" and that they "could not always be detained in...bondage."[1] As events would show, he was not alone in seeing Haiti as a potent symbol of black nationalism.

The idea of sending American free Blacks to Haiti was not new in 1817. Jefferson had suggested asking Toussaint L'Ouverture to take in the freedmen if Virginia opted for emancipation, and Toussaint's successor, Dessalines, had seen in immigration a solution to manpower shortages in the Haitian army. However, nothing had come of these schemes. Then, in 1818, a young New Englander "of pure African blood [and]...highly polished manners" arrived in Philadelphia with a new plan.[2]

Prince Saunders had been sent to England for an education by white philanthropists in his native Boston. In London the abolitionists Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce enlisted

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[1] Isaac V. Brown, Biography of the Rev. Robert Finley 2d ed. (Philadelphia: John W. Moore, 1857), p. 123.

[2] William Douglass, Annals of St. Thomas's African Church (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1862), p. 124.

him to help them persuade Haiti's King Henry Christophe to accept black emigrants from America.[3] They wanted to help the slaves, but Saunders hoped to extend the scheme to include free Blacks.

On his first visit to Haiti Saunders was welcomed by Christophe and sent back to London to hire teachers for the king's new schools. There he published his Haytian Letters, in which he gave a glowing account of Christophe's administration. By the fall of 1818 he was in Philadelphia, where he took every opportunity to praise Haiti to Blacks and whites alike.

After spreading the word in Philadelphia, Saunders traveled to New York and Boston, preaching the merits of Haitian emigration to anyone who would listen. Back in England, Clarkson was dubious about this new development. It was one thing to liberate slaves and send them to Haiti, but free Blacks had a right to citizenship in the United States, which was "as much their Country, as it [was] that of any White man." However, Saunders finally won him over and Clarkson agreed to join him in asking Christophe to grant asylum to America's free Blacks.

Thanks to their combined powers of persuasion and his own sense of the advantages he might derive, Christophe agreed to cooperate. He asked for lists of families wishing to emigrate, with notes on their skills and their character. He would check off the names of those he would accept.[4] In the summer of 1820

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[3] The two abolitionists had been corresponding with Christophe for several years. Hubert Cole, Christophe: King of Haiti (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967), p. 223.

[4] Clarkson to Vaux, January 31, 1820. Vaux Papers. HSP.

Saunders was summoned to Haiti to discuss the emigration program.

However, by the time Saunders arrived, Christophe was paralyzed by a stroke. He was still awaiting an interview with Christophe when a rebellion occurred and the king committed suicide. In the resulting chaos, Saunders barely escaped with his life. He wrote to Clarkson that the coup had frustrated the plans of many affluent American Blacks. "Some of the most respectable people of color" had authorized him to make arrangements for them to relocate.[5] In fact, black Americans no longer needed an intermediary. The new president, Jean Pierre Boyer, contacted them directly.

One of Boyer's major goals in the early 1820's was to win United States recognition for Haiti and he made repeated overtures to the American government, even offering to find an envoy white enough to be welcome in Washington. Every approach was rebuffed.[6] Fearing an invasion by the French, who had never accepted the loss of their colony, Boyer needed allies. Haiti was also desperately short of manpower. Years of warfare and internal strife had taken their toll. American immigration offered a solution to all his problems. Unskilled settlers could become field-hands, while artisans and merchants could revitalize Haiti's sagging economy. In return for taking in thousands of

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[5] Cole, Christophe, pp. 269, 276. Saunders to Clarkson, July 14, 1821 in Griggs and Prator, eds. Correspondence, pp. 226.

[6] Ludwell Lee Montague, Haiti and the United States, 1714-1938 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1940), pp. 50-52.

unwanted free Blacks, Boyer believed a grateful United States government would grant him diplomatic recognition.

In New York Loring D. Dewey, a white agent for the American Colonization Society, was fighting an uphill battle. Black New Yorkers refused to embark for Liberia, but they often expressed interest in Haiti. On his own initiative, Dewey wrote to Boyer in the spring of 1824 to ask whether he would accept American immigrants. Here was exactly the opening Boyer had been waiting for. He never doubted that Dewey was writing at the behest of the ACS and its powerful friends in Washington -- and Dewey never corrected that initial misunderstanding.[7]

Boyer confessed he had often wondered why the ACS sent people to Liberia instead of Haiti, but he had hesitated to approach the ACS in case his motives were misconstrued. He only sought to serve "the cause of humanity" and give "a sure asylum, to the unfortunate men, who have the alternative of going to the barbarous shores of Africa, where misery or...death may await them."[8] Boyer promised to welcome as many people as chose to settle. He would share the cost of relocating them with the ACS and would give them land. As for the issue of citizenship, "Those who come, being children of Africa, shall be Haytiens as soon as they put their feet on the soil of Hayti."[9]

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[7] Loring D. Dewey, Correspondence Relative to the Emigration to Hayti, of the Free People of Colour, In the United States (New York: Mahlon Day, 1824), pp. 3-4.

[8] Ibid., pp. 7, 11.

[9] Ibid., pp. 7-10, 20.

Boyer dispatched to the United States an agent, Jonathas Granville, with a set of instructions intended for publication.[10] Three classes of people were invited to emigrate. The first class would comprise those ready to work "uncultivated, or neglected lands." Each person would get free passage, four months' supplies, and three acres of land. Once they had improved that land, they would get as much more "as the government may judge them entitled to, as a reward for their sobriety, industry, and economy." Those in the second class would work land already under cultivation as tenant farmers. They would have to repay the cost of their passage in six months, as would those in the third class -- craftsmen, merchants, and teachers. Boyer envisaged the arrival of six thousand settlers in the first year.[11]

Granville's first stop in the United States was in Philadelphia. Dewey later insisted this had been a bad choice. The Quakers were in control, and they considered "every measure concerning the blacks which did not originate from them was mistaken." Few wished Blacks to enjoy true equality: it was enough if they were "well treated as...servants." Once the Quakers discovered what Granville was about, they tried to take

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[10] Granville, a mulatto, had been an officer in Napoleon's army. He served Alexandre Petion and, when Petion died, he allied himself with Boyer. Biographie, pp. 3-18.

[11] Haytien Emigration Society of Philadelphia, Information for the Free People of Colour, Who Are Inclined to Emigrate to Hayti (Philadelphia: J.H. Cunningham, 1825), pp. 7-10. To fund the scheme Boyer sent a cargo of coffee to Charles Collins, a New York merchant. He was to sell it and give Granville the proceeds.

over the scheme. When that failed, they began undermining it.[12]

With hindsight, it may have been unwise to begin operations in Philadelphia, but in 1824 prospects there seemed promising. Robert Walsh, the editor of the influential National Gazette and Literary Register, was won over, as was the editor of Nile's Register.[13] Granville also enlisted Nicholas Biddle, the president of the Bank of the United States.[14]

Within the black community it was Bishop Allen of the African Methodist Episcopal church who took charge. While Granville went off to New York, Allen summoned community leaders to his home. The Philadelphians were cautious. They had opposed the ACS since 1817, and the involvement of Dewey, an ACS agent, in the Haitian scheme raised fears that it had been sanctioned by the society. However, those fears were overcome and a larger meeting was called to present the plan to the community.[15]

At that meeting Allen read Boyer's call for settlers and a statement from Thomas Paul, a respected black minister from Boston. Paul had spent some time on Haiti and was full of praise for the republic. He had found the Haitians friendly and he

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[12] Dewey to Granville fils, May 11, 1865, in Biographie, pp. 239-41.

[13] See National Gazette, June 16, June 19, June 21 and June 22, 1824, and Nile's Register, July 8, 1824, in Biographie, pp. 114-16, 126.

[14] Although Granville had friends, he loathed the United States. He had "commanded whites with honor...their own country," but most white Americans treated him like "an unusual animal." Granville to Boyer, June 12, 1824, Biographie, pp. 210, 216.

[15] Poulson's American Daily Advertiser, July 5, 1824.

thought economic prospects on the island excellent. Moreover, the determination of the Haitian people to preserve their liberty "must possess advantages highly inviting to men who are sighing for the enjoyment of the common rights...of mankind."[16] Convinced of the wisdom of emigration, the Philadelphians endorsed it and their leaders organized the Haytien Emigration Society.

Within weeks the officers of the society produced a pamphlet setting forth the advantages of emigration. They stressed their motives were above suspicion. "We are your brethren in colour and degradation; and it gives us a peculiar delight to assist a brother to leave a country, where it is but too certain the coloured man can never enjoy his rights." They also urged that Blacks should be ready to defend each other. While discounting fears of a French invasion of Haiti, they noted the praise heaped on Lafayette "for flying to the aid of an oppressed people" during the Revolutionary War. Haiti was "the only spot where the coloured man has gained his rights" and its overthrow "would...be putting out the very sun of our hopes."[17]

The optimism of the Philadelphians was shared by the New Yorkers, who formed their own emigration society. Other groups sprang up along the Atlantic seaboard and as far west as Cincinnati. No city with a sizable free black population was untouched by "emigration fever." Enthusiasm grew as the ACS

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[16] Boston Sentinel, July 6, 1824, in Biographie, pp. 140-44.

[17] Information for the People of Colour, pp. 4, 6. Lafayette had just visited Philadelphia on his tour of the United States.

denounced the scheme. Dewey was told in no uncertain terms that it threatened the success of the Liberian colony. As far as many free Blacks were concerned, if the hated ACS denounced Haitian resettlement, it must have merit.

In their campaign to recruit settlers, black leaders drew on the glowing accounts of Haiti supplied by Granville. However, they failed to take into account the results of years of war and neglect. The capital, Port au Prince, was in a "ruinous state," with its population shrunk from 60,000 to 5,000. In rural areas conditions were far worse.[27] The Haitian peasant could be forgiven for asking in whose interests the revolution had been fought. "The united Haitian family of the patriotic orations" was really "two Haitis, the one...a small exploiting class, the other ...the mass of ex-slaves."[23] Hundreds of black Americans set sail for Haiti with little idea how the majority of Haitians lived.

When the first emigrants were ready to leave Philadelphia, Bishop Allen reported to Boyer on the progress that was being made. He had the names of five hundred would-be settlers and was getting more inquiries daily. His heart warmed to a man who wanted to give "a poor oppressed people...an asylum where they can enjoy liberty and equality." Whites were trying to foist on Boyer the disreputable element within the black community, but their appeals were useless. It was the "respectable and hard-

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[27] Nile's Weekly Register, 44, p. 867, cited in John Edward Baur, "Mulatto Machiavelli: Jean Pierre Boyer and the Haiti of His Day," Journal of Negro History 32 (June 1947), p. 332.

[23] Montague, Haiti, p. 11.

working" people who were opting for emigration. As Allen explained: "The voice of liberty is sweet in our ears."[24]

To further the scheme Allen also began writing to Secretary General Inginac, who was playing host to Allen's son, John. Inginac assured Allen that the first group of Americans were delighted with Haiti. There were some whose "desponding inertion" made them unwilling to work, but the industrious settlers were doing well. Inginac thanked Allen for his efforts "to reunite the great family" of Blacks in the United States and Haiti.[25]

Allen soon heard from an old friend. Benjamin F. Hughes, formerly the pastor of Philadelphia's First African Presbyterian Church, had no regrets about moving to Haiti. He blamed any discontent on the unrealistic expectations of some settlers. Boyer's government was not at fault: it "has been and continues to be liberal beyond any reasonable conception."[26]

John Summersett echoed Hughes. The Haitians had received him and his companions "more like brothers than strangers...The first gentlemen took [them] by the hand and led [them] to their tables, and the ladies would take all [their] children to use them as their own." Summersett believed that "no African of candid or industrious habits can deny this being the happy land of African

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[24] Allen to Boyer, August 22, 1824, in Biographie, pp. 224-25.

[25] Genius of Universal Emancipation, January 1825.

[26] United States Gazette, April 18, 1825.

liberty."[27] However, Hughes and Summersett were men with wealth, skills, and established leadership status back home. The "first gentlemen" of Haiti came out to meet them, but the reception poorer immigrants were accorded was very different.

Tales began circulating to the effect that not everyone was doing well on Haiti, and that those who wanted to leave were being prevented from doing so. Black leaders and their white allies were soon involved in a desperate defence of emigration. Dewey, now no longer employed by the ACS, went to Haiti to investigate. He reported meeting some disgruntled settlers, but he found others quite happy to stay. He called on white Americans to abolish slavery and send the freedmen to Haiti.[28]

Benjamin Lundy, the editor of the Genius of Universal Emancipation, observed that Boyer had "invited such of our colored people...as were of...industrious habits." However, hostile whites had convinced "hundreds of effeminate, lazy wretches" to go, with the assurance that they would be given "offices of honour, trust, and profit." Naturally they were unhappy, but they were not forced to stay. According to Lundy, Boyer was allowing anyone who wanted to return to do so. The tales told by returning settlers would have a negative effect but he believed "the check [would] be momentary."[29]

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[27] Ibid., December 28, 1824, cited in Jackson, "Pan-African Nationalism," p. 116.

[28] Genius of Universal Emancipation, March 1825.

[29] Ibid., April 1825.

By the spring of 1825 emigrationists had another problem to contend with. Boyer was rethinking his whole policy. Alleging that some unscrupulous emigrants were conniving with masters of vessels to cheat his government by claiming their passage money and returning to America, he announced that everyone would have to pay for their passage.[30] But far more lay behind this than the need to stop fraud. Boyer had found the Americans less tractable than he had supposed. While people like Hughes and Summersett were proving cooperative, poorer Blacks were leaving the countryside for the towns, where unemployment was already high. Boyer needed them as field-hands, but most were city dwellers and such skills as they had were suited to an urban environment. Even more serious was the failure of his diplomatic initiative. Boyer had learned that Dewey, far from speaking for the ACS, was working in opposition to it. Many influential whites who had promised to back the Haitian plan when it was first proposed, had drifted away. Dewey no longer had any friends among highly-placed ACS supporters in Washington, and Boyer's hopes of winning recognition were dashed.[31]

By April 1826 it was estimated that, of 6000 settlers whose passage had been paid by the Haitian government, 2000 had

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[30] Ibid., April 1825.

[31] Dewey was accused of luring away black servants and wanting to make Haiti a base for attacks on the slave-holding South. Dewey to Granville fils, May 23, 1865, in Biographie, p. 244.

returned to America.[32] If Boyer was disenchanted, so were they. The promised government aid often did not materialize and, instead of being welcomed as members of the "great family," they were regarded as inferior foreigners fit only for menial labor. The warm welcome was reserved for a privileged few. Most found themselves in the midst of "a people whose language they could not understand...and on whose faces they saw mocking smiles, in spite of all the goodwill they pledged them."[33]

Yet, even after Boyer refused to continue offering free passage, immigration continued.[34] Some settlers were newly freed slaves. Fanny Wright took thirty-two ex-slaves to Haiti from her failed utopian community of Nashoba.[35] Benjamin Lundy urged North Carolina Quakers to send their slaves to Haiti, and he made two trips with freedmen entrusted to his care by Southern planters.[36]

While some immigrants were ex-slaves taken to Haiti by well-

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[32] The exact number of immigrants is unknown. Henri Granville son drew on Haiti's official gazette to state that, between September 1824 and January 1825, six thousand arrived. Biographie, p. 21n. Benjamin Hunt estimated as many as 13,000 accepted Boyer's offer. Remarks on Hayti as a Place of Settlement for Afric-Americans; and on the Mulatto as a Race for the Tropics (Philadelphia: T. B. Pugh, 1860), p. 4.

[33] Ardouin, Etudes, vol. 9, pp. 300-301.

[34] Some settlers found themselves in the Dominican Republic when the island was divided in 1844. Liberator, November 5, 1847; Samuel Hazard, Santo Domingo, Past and Present; With a Glance at Hayti (New York: Harper, 1873), pp. 199, 204, 486; H. Hoetink, "'Americans' in Samana," Caribbean Studies, 2 (April 1962), 3-22.

[35] Celia Morris Eckhardt, Frances Wright -- Rebel in America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 81, 198, 211-12.

[36] Friends sent over at least 119 ex-slaves. North Carolina law prohibited manumission unless the freedmen left the state.

meaning whites, others came on their own initiative. Just as some people were attracted to Canada or Trinidad in the 1830's, so others found their way to Haiti. John Allen, the bishop's son, stayed and set up in business as a printer. Robert Douglass Jr., a gifted portrait painter, became Boyer's court artist. Mastering Spanish and French, he mixed with Haiti's upper class and sent glowing reports of life on Haiti to friends in Philadelphia.[37] Scorned by others in the black elite, Hezekiah Grice of Baltimore emigrated in 1832. He prospered, and return visits to the United States convinced him that he had made the right decision.[38] James Forten, who had spoken so forcefully of his sense of kinship with the Haitian people, stayed in Philadelphia, but his brother-in-law and two of his apprentices emigrated.[39]

Like Forten, many free Blacks eventually decided against emigration in the 1820's and 1830's (although the Haitian scheme would be revived in the 1850's). However, like Forten, even those who had no intention of settling on Haiti continued to express deep interest in the Haitian republic, and to call upon defenders of slavery to acknowledge an unpalatable truth -- that slave rebellions were not always doomed to failure.

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[37] Colored American, March 3, 1838 and ibid., June 16, 1838.

[38] Grice claimed he had founded the national convention movement, only to see it taken over by the Philadelphians. He worked as a carver and gilder before becoming Director of Public Works in Port au Prince. The Anglo-African Magazine October 1859, in Howard H. Bell, ed. Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864 (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

[39] Hunt, Remarks on Hayti, p. 6.